

GUEST COLUMN LORI CURTIS

COMMISSION KEEPING WATCH ON MONTANA WATERWAYS

THERE IS MUCH TALK ABOUT THE threat of Aquatic Invasive Species (AIS) in Montana, and some confusion regarding which organizations are working to address the threat. While a number of AIS early detection and monitoring programs have been in place for several years, many of those efforts were enhanced with the 2016 “positive” finding for mussels in Tiber Reservoir and the “suspect” finding in Canyon Ferry Reservoir. The state of Montana is quite fortunate to have excellent leadership, a broad base of partnerships, and an extraordinary level of coordination in the fight against AIS. Here is a brief description of the AIS management landscape in Montana.

The effort is led by Montana Fish, Wildlife & Parks’ (FWP) first ever AIS Bureau Chief Thomas Woolf. His extensive experience starts with a master of science degree in environmental science with an emphasis on invasive species’ impacts on aquatic ecosystems. Following his academic achievements, he enjoyed a successful leadership role for Idaho’s AIS program from 2007 until he joined MFWP in 2017. Woolf’s dedication to his leadership role has already resulted in a number of improvements to AIS programming in the state. The Montana Department of Natural Resources and Conservation (DNRC) oversees an AIS grant program for the state, provides administrative support and guidance to FWP’s AIS program, and staffs the Montana Invasive Species Council (MISC) and the Upper Columbia Conservation Commission (UC3).

MISC was legislatively created in 2015 and is tasked with identifying priority invasive species issues, enhancing coordination among the state and partners, and making recommendations to improve management. The Confederated Salish & Kootenai Tribes (CSKT), the Blackfoot Nation, Glacier National Park, the provinces of Alberta and British Columbia, the Swan Lakers, the Whitefish Lake Institute, and a number of other organizations have been addressing AIS at various levels and in specific regions.

The Columbia River Basin in Montana is the last major river system in the U.S. that is un-infested by invasive mussels making it critical to protect. In 2017, the Montana Legislature created the UC3 to enhance early detection, monitoring and rapid response efforts through relationship building and increased coordination amongst agencies charged with AIS management in the Upper Columbia Basin. Because the Upper Columbia River serves as the headwaters to this system, the UC3 now plays a pivotal leadership role in the fight against AIS. The UC3 coordinator, Kate Wilson, is provided by DNRC. Wilson brings to the program an extensive background in AIS, including a master of science

degree and broad experience with the Idaho, Florida and Alberta AIS programs.

The UC3s official mission is “to protect the Aquatic environment in Montana Tributaries to the Columbia River from the threat of AIS in order to protect Water resources, downstream interests and the economic and ecological vitality of the region.” The deliverables, however, include the development of a cooperative monitoring strategy and plan among water management agencies; encouraging international, tribal, federal, state, regional, and local resource managers; developing partnerships with downstream states; developing and implementing an Upper Columbia River Basin-focused AIS education and outreach strategy; encouraging economic development by reducing AIS threats and conducting restoration and infestation control measures; providing a report on all activities to the governor, director of DNRC and the Environmental Quality Council; and to make recommendation to the governor, federal, tribal, state, provincial, regional, and local agencies for reducing threats from AIS, conducting restoration and infestation control measures.

The UC3, which first met in October of 2017, now plays a fundamental, essential, and comprehensive role in combating AIS in Montana. Four committees were formed to ensure achievement of the commission’s goals and deliverables. They include Education and Outreach, Watercraft Inspections, Early Detection and Monitoring, and Response and Preparedness. UC3’s nine voting members include representatives of the CSKT Tribal Council, Montana Conservation Districts, hydropower utility industry, recreation organizations, private industry, private landowners, electric cooperatives, MISC, and a member-at-large. A number of non-voting federal agency ex-officio members also serve on the commission. All of these members and their many tribal, federal, state, and provincial partners are working together to address AIS threats through shared funding, and collaborative planning, training, and programming. As the governor-appointed chair of the UC3 and the Montana Conservation Districts representative, I am pleased to apply my AIS and management expertise to the commission. This role allows me to apply my master of science in conservation biology and is a natural extension of my position as science and education director for the Whitefish Lake Institute.

AIS is a complex, pervasive, and expensive issue. The bad news is that there are AIS plant and animal infestations within and bordering Montana waters. The good news is that Montana now has the UC3 – a strong, competent, and dedicated army of professionals on the front lines of combating AIS.